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‘Working from home’: academics and Airbnb, an autoethnographic account

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Abstract

This paper offers an autoethnographic account of the impact Airbnb has on ourselves, as hosts, in our own homes in Greater Manchester. The paper is theoretically framed by Goffman’s (1959:79) notion of “theatrical performance”. This framework is pertinent to our positions as Airbnb hosts, since performance is key to the way in which we present our homes and ourselves to guests. The paper provides insight into our findings, surrounding three key themes: spatial management; dirty work; and tensions between guests and hosts.

Key words:

Airbnb; Guest; Home; Host; Performance

Introduction

Airbnb is an online network enabling people to rent residential properties for short-term stays, with the cost of such accommodation set by the property owner. Airbnb is credited with a number of positive impacts. For instance, it can lead to a more authentic travelling experience (Lalicic and Weismayer, 2017), enabling guests to “live like a local” (Sans and Dominguez, 2016:218). Additionally, it can benefit the social sphere by generating new social ties between individuals who would previously not have met (Midgett *et al.*, 2017). Further, Airbnb has been credited with turning millions of people into part-time entrepreneurs (Sans and Dominguez, 2016). Moreover, it is considered a sustainable alternative to traditional accommodation (Midgett *et al.*, 2017). However, Airbnb has not escaped criticism (Gurran, 2017). It is argued to be geared towards tourists, and consequently fewer homes are being rented to locals, as landlords find it more profitable to rent accommodation out on Airbnb (Midgett *et al.*, 2017).

Perspectives on Airbnb have been explored in several geographical contexts e.g. London (Simcock and Smith, 2016), Berlin (Stors and Kagermeier, 2015) and Barcelona (Sans and Dominguez, 2016); however, perspectives on Airbnb in Greater Manchester, UK, have yet to be explored

in the academic literature. This research is timely, and much needed, because in 2016 the number of properties listed on Airbnb in Manchester grew by 83%, whilst the number of tourists using these properties increased by 135%, to 86,000 (Manchester Evening News, 2017). This paper is part of a larger study, which aims to explore the impact of Airbnb on communities in Greater Manchester. The focus of this paper is to respond to Midgett *et al.*’s (2017) call for more research into the impact Airbnb has on the hosts themselves. This paper is structured as follows. First, we provide insight into the academic context, focusing on host and guest relationships, and we introduce the theoretical framework of the study, Goffman’s (1959:79) notion of “theatrical performance”. Second, we discuss the method of auto-ethnography. Third, we provide insight into our findings, surrounding three key themes: spatial management; dirty work; and tensions between guests and hosts.

Host and guest relationships

According to Stors and Kagermeier (2015), Airbnb hosts observed that visitors appreciate the ambiance of home accommodation, considering it more individual than a hotel. Moreover, the authors state that direct contact with the host, and an inside perspective into the local norms and traditions,

positively contributed to the specific visitor experience of Airbnb. This relates to a point made by Neuhofer (2017); the author asserts that guests may wish to co-create experiences with hosts, including partying and touring. Stors (2018) contends that research into Airbnb has predominantly concentrated on the tourist perspective, neglecting the host perspective. One notable exception is Knaus' (2018) research, based on research conducted into Airbnb in New York, the author reflects that hosts consider hosting to be easy and fun, whilst also treating it as a business. The author also notes that hosts can feel 'burnt out' from their role (Knaus, 2018).

Domenico and Lynch (2007) reflect on how commercial homes blur traditional boundaries between home and work, recognising that the home is both a site of commercial work and domestic retreat. The authors explore the social control and spatial management strategies employed by hosts and guests; yet, equally, how hosts may 'use' guests as surrogate companions. Domenico and Lynch (2007) assert that the presence of everyday features (e.g. photographs) may provide reassurance and a sense of authenticity for guests, due to their familiarity. Yet, guests may also feel as though they are invading a host's privacy if they are not able to retain a sense of impersonal neutrality.

Following Domenico and Lynch (2007), there can be tensions between guests and hosts; guests bring their own routines, which can present a challenge to host rituals. The authors also assert that the guest's presence can influence the host's behaviour; for instance, how they dress in their own home. Equally though, the authors highlight that guests may be unable to hide their activities from the host's voyeuristic gaze. Nonetheless, it can be seen that guests are not passive; they are active agents with the capacity to impact the host, and the meaning of home. Our research builds on this small body of literature, bringing to the fore the emotional and embodied impacts of Airbnb on hosts. In order to do so, we engage with Goffman's (1959) work on performance.

Towards understanding host performances

Writing in the context of class in the 1950s, Goffman (1959:79) deploys the perspective of "theatrical performance". According to Goffman (1959), people in work situations present themselves and their activities to others, to guide and control the impression others form. This framework is pertinent to our positions as Airbnb hosts, since performance is key to the way in which we present our homes and ourselves to guests. Goffman (1959:17) contends that people can sometimes act in "thoroughly calculating" manners, projecting versions of themselves to provoke a desired

response. Goffman (1959) is clear to point out that the impression of 'reality' fostered by a performance is delicate and fragile and can come under discredit because of minor mishaps.

Goffman (1959:109;114) distinguishes between "front region" and "back region". 'Front region' refers to the space in which the performance takes place. 'Back region' is where performances are openly constructed, and where performers can relax and drop their fronts (Goffman, 1959). This is where, as Goffman (1959:97) contends, "suppressed facts make an appearance". We seek to interrogate the performances of ourselves, as Airbnb hosts; this is particularly interesting in the space of the home, in which there is not a clear demarcation of 'front' and 'back' stages. However, through spatial management by hosts, some spaces in the home may be outside the guest's realm. Hosts can thus use this space, for instance their bedroom, to drop their performances, and step out of character. Having outlined our theoretical framework, we now offer insight into our methodological approach of autoethnography.

Methodological approach: an autoethnography

This paper is novel methodologically; it offers an auto-ethnographic account of ourselves, two lecturers/academic researchers based in the North West of England, who undertake Airbnb hosting in our own homes. The research was conducted between March 2017 and January 2018 in our homes, a semi-detached three-bedroom house in the city of Salford, and a detached three-bedroom house in the town of Middleton (both in Greater Manchester). We use Airbnb to let out our homes in different ways: sometimes a lone room; sometimes two bedrooms to people in the same group; and sometimes whole house bookings when we are not present. We kept field diaries over the course of ten months, reflecting on our experiences of hosting guests. Autoethnography can be used as a mode of writing to recall, re-tell and re-veal bodily embodiment as self-reflexive inquiry (Allbon, 2012). The process of autoethnography combines characteristics of ethnography and autobiography that allows individuals to explore cultural understanding through self-observation, which results in individual narratives (Chang, 2008). Autoethnography is beneficial in giving access to private worlds and providing rich data (Mendez, 2013), and thus presents an account sensitive to our embodied and emotional experiences as Airbnb hosts.

Autoethnography is not a research approach devoid of criticism, however. Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2008:209) note that autoethnography can be considered "self-indulgent ... akin to navel-gazing". Others are sceptical

of the method, as it does not meet the “holy trinity” (Sparkes, 1998:365) of traditional criteria: validity, reliability and generalisability. However, as Allen-Collinson and Hockey (2008) contend, this judgment is derived from positivistic research, and is problematic when applied to autoethnography. Another factor to consider is that autoethnographic writing can lead to the “vulnerability of revealing yourself” to the judgment of a wider audience (Ellis and Bochner, 2000:738); this is particularly relevant when discussing our home-lives. Autoethnography exposes the researcher’s inner feelings and thoughts; this entails ethical considerations (Mendez, 2013). Writing autoethnographically demands being honest about events described, along with the words expressed by people involved in these events.

Since autoethnography is a process for self-exploration and interrogation (Starr, 2010), the real ‘participants’ in an autoethnographic study are the people undertaking the research (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Ethnography requires considerations regarding whether to seek consent from guests involved in our interactions. Though Stacey (1988:23) tells that “the lives, loves, and tragedies that fieldwork informants share with a researcher are ultimately data, grist for the ethnographic mill”, since this is an autoethnography, it will involve us reflecting on *ourselves* and *our* roles as hosts, as opposed to interactions amongst guests. Relational ethics is an emerging growth area for autoethnographers (see Ellis, 2007), given the ethical implications for everyone represented in a transgressive telling (Denshire, 2014). Relational ethics is important because, “in the process of writing about ourselves, we also write about others” (Sparkes, 2013:2007). We will be cognisant to these relational responsibilities to the unnamed participants who are implicated in our self-stories (see Hernandez and Ngunjiri, 2013).

We analysed the data by hand, rather than using computer-aided analysis software, recognising that this facilitates greater closeness to the data. We consider that this “human as analyst” (Robson, 2011:463) stance is important due to the autoethnographic nature of the study, whereby “the Self of the researcher is integrated into the research” (Woods, 1996:51). We adopted a thematic analysis approach. After reading through our data set multiple times, we separated the data into smaller, significant parts. We then labelled each of these smaller parts with a code. After this, we compared each new segment of data with the previous codes that emerged. This ensured that similar data was labelled with the same code. We dismissed any preconceived data categories and loosened the initial focus of the study

to “generate as many codes as possible” (Emerson *et al.*, 1995:152). We now turn to offer an overview of our findings, focusing on the themes of: spatial management; dirty work; and tensions between guests and hosts.

Spatial management

According to Phua (2018), Airbnb permits guests to access a more private sphere, in comparison to hotels. Moreover, the author asserts that Airbnb enables guests to engage in potentially meaningful inter-personal discourses, with hosts being able to decide on the desired level of interaction with guests (Phua, 2018). In the excerpts below, the hosts demonstrate agency in micro-managing spatialities within the home:

Every time I show a guest around, I show them around the whole house, and tell them to ‘make themselves at home’. Yet, really, I hope they keep themselves to themselves. I have photographs of myself, my partner and our dogs in every room, except the guest bedrooms. I do this as an implicit way of telling guests that this is ‘our’ space, and ‘yours’ is the anonymous space of the bedroom. So, whilst I show them around the whole home, I secretly hope they just stay in their room. (SW¹ diary)

I could hear the guest’s footsteps coming down the stairs, so I quickly grabbed the remote and turned the volume of the television up. I hoped the loud television would be enough to deter the guest from entering the lounge, where I was trying to relax and unwind after a long day at work. It wasn’t though, as the guest entered. I reflected that next time I didn’t want to be disturbed I would ensure the doors are shut so that it is a physical (rather than sonic) barrier that guests would have to cross. (CW² diary)

From the first diary entry above, one can see that whilst delivering a ‘home-tour’, SW never explicitly discussed with guests that they should not enter specific ‘back stage’ regions (Goffman, 1959). Quite the contrary, SW verbally and physically welcomed guests into the whole home. The spatial separating into ‘back-stage’ regions, where SW can rest and relax without the presence of guests, was achieved more subtly, for instance, using decorations, including photographs, around the home. Paulauskaite *et al.* (2017:625) note that guests like the uniqueness of homes, and the “family atmosphere” and personality generated through decorations and props. This suggests that SW’s use of ‘stage props’ (Goffman, 1959) as a means of excluding guests may be counterproductive; these may be the spaces guests feel most at home. We have used additional means of spatial management. In the second excerpt above, CW discusses utilising the strategy of turning the television to

1. SW denotes the first author’s initials

2. CW denotes the second author’s initials

a loud volume setting, as a sonic means of excluding guests from feeling welcome in the sitting room. CW also reflects on shutting doors in sitting rooms or dining rooms when occupying these rooms, as a means of creating a physical divide between guests and hosts. The aforementioned strategies provide a counterpoint to Knaus' (2018) findings that, it is first and foremost, the aim of the host to make guests feel comfortable.

In the below excerpt, however, it is the guests that have the agency, and the host who resultantly modifies her own spatialities:

Sometimes I feel as though I'm the guest. I deliberately hide away or avoid using the kitchen when I hear the guests in there. My partner restricts himself from using his turbo trainer in the home, because he would be embarrassed for guests to see him exercise. We have two dogs, and we ask guests if they are okay with this prior to their stay. They always respond that they "love dogs". When they arrive though, sometimes they are very scared of the pets. There was one weekend I remember, a bitterly cold one, that my partner and I spent pretty much the whole weekend in the garden with the dogs, whilst the guests dominated the house. (SW diary)

SW reflects that, on occasion, she feels as if she does not belong in her own home; her micro-geographies are affected, and she and her partner are excluded from activities they would like to perform in the home, such as cooking and exercising, due to the presence of guests. More than this, SW reflects how she and her partner self-excluded themselves from the space of the home, relegating themselves to the garden, recognising that guests were uncomfortable with their two dogs. This links with Domenico and Lynch's (2007) recognition that the guest's presence can influence the host's behaviour. From the above, one can see that SW takes a dislike to guests using her home in a way that is indistinguishable from herself and her partner (see Gurrán, 2017); she does not approve when guests become 'too familiar' and treat the home 'as their own' (despite telling them to), with no respect for host privacy.

Dirty work

The notion of 'dirty work' arises from Wibberley (2013), who undertook the method of shadowing the 'dirty workplace' in domiciliary care, offering insight into how such unsanitary spaces can negatively affect care workers through increasing their workload, which can further devalue their work, and present risks to their well-being. In the below autoethnographic excerpts we reflect on the 'dirty work' involved in maintaining our homes for Airbnb:

One weekend we rented the whole house out. I was plumping up the cushions on my return and found a little

see-through packet with a white powdery substance inside – drugs. Outside there were also a number of poppers. I felt really dirty trying to dispose of the substances. I reported the issue to Airbnb and they offered me a deep clean of the house as compensation. (SW diary)

I went to the supermarket earlier to buy cleaning products and spent nearly £20 on things like polish, floor cleaner, bleach, plug hole unblocker, kitchen cleaner and bathroom spray. My partner and I joked that we only ever clean the house for Airbnb guests, but then we realised that it is true. Our standards of cleanliness and hygiene are much higher when we have guests to stay, because we know we will be rated on a public platform. In fact, my cleaning rituals become quite 'OCD' ahead of hosting. (CW diary)

In the first excerpt, SW reflects on finding illegal substances in her home, and how having to dispose of them led her to feeling as if both her home, and herself, were dirty. Findings drugs and poppers in her home led SW to imagine how her home had been used in her absence (e.g. for parties). Whilst SW's home had been left in a 'clean' condition, despite the presence of the drugs and poppers, Airbnb recognised that finding such materials would make the home 'feel' dirty, and they thus offered compensation in the form of a deep clean of the home. Second, CW reflects on the need to clean her home prior to guests arriving; this is because, through hosting guests via Airbnb, her home is infiltrated with bodies, bodily fluids, human and household waste from relative strangers (Wibberley, 2013). Interestingly, CW reflects how her standards of cleanliness when hosting are higher than when she does not have guests. This supports Knaus' (2018) contention that, for Airbnb hosts, household chores intensify, and obtain a new visibility. CW utilises cleaning equipment to "embellish and illuminate" her performances with, what Goffman (1959:45;46) would term, "a favourable social style", to craft her social front in the "front stage" arena. Cleaning paraphernalia exist in the "backstage" region (Goffman, 1959), however, tucked away in cupboards, so as not to give away that this is not a 'usual' standard of cleanliness.

Tensions between guests and hosts

We have had a number of positive hosting experiences, including: forming long-lasting friendships with guests (Lalicic and Weismayer, 2017), learning about other cultures, 'repeat business', receiving gifts from guests, and glowing reviews left publicly. However, in line with the findings in Domenico and Lynch's (2007) study, on occasion, we experienced tensions with guests; this can be demonstrated through the autoethnographic excerpts below:

Our house is kept warm, as I personally love being warm. Never in my life though, have I slept with the heating on

all night. I have had texts around mid-night from guests saying: "the radiator was warm and now it has gone cold; how do I put it on again?". Or, guests asking if the heating is broke because "it wasn't on all night". On some occasions, I go downstairs and put the heating on for an hour and sit in bed and then go and turn it off again. I refuse to keep it on all night. I think this is greedy and wonder if guests would do it in their own homes, or whether they are trying to 'get their money's worth'. From my perspective, they are eating into profit. (SW diary)

Our guest came in at 2am following a night out. We woke up in the middle of the night thinking we were being burgled, before quickly realising it must be the guests. Although we do not give guests 'curfews' and we give them their own key so that they have agency over leaving and entering the house, I do think it is disrespectful to come in, drunk, so late at night/early in the morning. (CW diary)

As can be seen through the above diary extracts, due to sharing the intimate space of the home, tensions between hosts and guests are inevitable. In the first excerpt, one can see that the host acted deceptively; she stated that she would turn the heating on, only to turn it off an hour later. There is almost a disdain for guests who wish to manage the atmosphere of the home, in terms of heating, and on other occasions lighting, with SW labelling them "greedy". The economic importance of Airbnb comes through, in terms of financial gains (Lampinen and Cheshire, 2016), with SW worrying that guests are eating into profit by using resources, such as heating and lighting, excessively. As well as the importance of space and spatial management, which we highlighted earlier in this paper, time became a source of tension between hosts and guests. In the second excerpt above, CW reflects on guests disrespectfully coming into her home at what she perceives to be an unacceptable time. Here we can see a case of 'arrhythmia' (Vannini, 2012:257); a discordance occurs, because the embodied rhythms of hosts and guests fail to align. This supports a comment made by Domenico and Lynch (2007); that is, guests bring their own routines (for instance, staying out late) which can present a challenge to host rituals (for instance, trying to get a good night's sleep). Having presented findings surrounding spatial management; dirty work; and tensions between guests and hosts, we draw this paper to a close.

Conclusions

In the paper, we have reflected on the everyday experiences of being Airbnb hosts, including the emotional and, drawing on Goffman (1959), performative labour we have undertaken when welcoming strangers into our own homes. We have provided insight into personal sacrifices; for instance, how we change our micro-mobilities and micro-geographies within our own homes, in response to making guests 'feel at home', sometimes resultantly feeling less at home ourselves. Equally though, we have highlighted tactics we use to retain a sense of privacy, including: displaying family photographs in certain rooms, turning the television volume up, and shutting doors. We recognise the affective, sensuous and visceral capacities of our homes, and, on occasion, deploy such strategies to create a sense of uncomfortableness for guests, resultantly keeping them 'in their place'. Whilst Airbnb prides itself on an ability to make guests 'belong anywhere' (Airbnb 2017), we have highlighted how we sometimes seek to create a sense of unbelonging for our guests.

Further, we have reflected on the 'dirty work' we have been required to undertake in our roles as Airbnb hosts (Wibberley, 2013), in terms of cleaning, tidying, and disposing of illegal substances. We reflected how the relationship between guests and hosts can, on occasion, be tense. We have highlighted how hosts can feel as if guests are 'greedy', through excessively using resources, and 'disrespectful', if they are not operating in line with the same embodied rhythms as hosts. Through candid qualitative excerpts from our autoethnographic field diaries, we have addressed Midgett *et al.*'s (2017) call to bring to the fore the impact Airbnb has on hosts. The findings from this paper suggests that, to continue to appeal to prospective hosts, Airbnb needs to move away from marketing campaigns which tell prospective guests 'don't go there, live there' (Airbnb, 2016). Whilst guests enjoy the authentic, 'back stage' (Goffman, 1959), experience offered by Airbnb (Neuhof, 2017), our own experiences as hosts suggest that we prefer guests to treat our home more like a hotel; that is, we prefer guests who 'come and go', rather than 'live' in our homes.

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